BIRDS NESTING WITH A CAMERA IN INDIA

Part V

BY

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(*continued from page 609 of this volume.*)

(*With* 5 *plates.*)

Ever since my arrival in India my ambition has been to depict, by means of the camera, the wonders of its immensely-varied avifauna. But, as the reader will readily understand, the difficulties in the way of the bird-photographer in this country are many; especially so in the case of the photographer who can only devote a very limited amount of his time to the task. True, the East has certain advantages over the West, as for instance the ease and cheapness with which one can move one's apparatus by means of that poor down-trodden human beast of burden, the Indian coolie. At home the ordinary mortal can only take out a very condensed equipment, as it generally means carrying it on one's own back, whereas here the quantity is only limited by the number of coolies one can afford to pay. In Kashmir when out in camp I invariably had an immediate following of three trekking along with me, consisting of two coolies carrying my two half-plate cameras, and their sheaths for a couple of dozen plates, a quarter plate reflex, and a case of lenses consisting of a Zeiss convertible, a Ross telecentric, and a Zeiss telephoto lens. The latter incidentally I have never used, although I certainly ought to have employed it on the Sooty Flycatcher's nest, the small photo of which appeared in the first of these articles. This nest was overlooked from an immense boulder at a distance of a few yards. These two men also carried my food for the day as an added burden, as well as sundry articles for use in constructing 'hides.' The third member was a shikari, who has now developed into an ardent egg-collector. He was of great use in looking for rests and of course carried my gun. I was thus enabled to travel unencumbered, my sole equipment being a pair of binoculars, a small folding hatchet and chisel clipped on to my belt and a long 'khud' stick. Nevertheless I fear the disadvantages of the climate very much outweigh the advantages, except of course in the hills, whither however this luckless mortal can only betake himself for but a short part of the year. In the plains the grilling heat of the summer renders the use of the 'hide' almost an impossibility. Can any one imagine the inside of a stuffy little tent about three feet square in a shade temperature of anything up to 110° or even more? The sequel to a couple of hours so spent I think I can well foresee; a hospital ward, hushed voices, and later a firing party. Developing is another difficulty during the summer months, since out in the

blue one cannot procure tons of ice with which to cool one's solutions, and I well remember once losing a whole batch of excellent negatives in Rajputana, seeing them melt away before my very eyes before they could be dried.

There are of course other means to be employed in obtaining records of the birds themselves besides using a 'hide' as for instance the distant release, and the reflex camera, but both these are very limited indeed in their scope of application. The first method entails disturbing the bird after each exposure, and I have never yet discovered a device of this nature, which worked really satisfactorily. As regards the use of the reflex I have been in possession of a really suitable one for some time now, and have as yet produced but one entirely satisfactory negative with it, that is using it legitimately as a super hand-camera. Still I have great hopes, as I cannot conceive of a more certain method of obtaining good results amongst nesting colonies of water-birds, such as Egrets, Cormorants, Painted Storks, etc., than the reflex, and I am consequently looking forward to the coming breeding season of these birds with considerable eagerness.

On the occasion of my second visit to Kashmir, the climate of that glorious country being all that could be desired, rendering the use of a 'hide' both possible and pleasant, I determined to see what I could do with a tent I had ordered to be made at a Cawnpore firm and forwarded to that very well known personage in Srinagar, Mr. Samad Shah, to await my arrival.

Being India, of course the order of things was reversed, and it appeared that I was expected to waste my leave awaiting the arrival of the tent. I struck, with the result that I reached Bandipur on the shores of the Wular lake on 22nd May, with nothing more suitable than one of those large umbrellas usually associated with surveyors. As a matter of fact it turned out to be invaluable and under the circumstances I could not have had anything better, although the next time I go to this particular spot, I shall take with me a collapsible canvas box, which I am having constructed with the outside camouflaged to represent a boulder. This I think will simplify matters considerably, as building a 'hide' from sods or stones, or even putting up and camouflaging the usual type of tent, is apt to waste valuable time, and the two former being immobile all the resultant photos can only be taken from the one standpoint. Of course nothing can be more suitable than a hide constructed from the very material in the vicinity of the nest, as harmonization is often half the battle. Also a 'hide' of a fixed shape cannot always be employed, so such a box in the outfit would only be supplementary to the ordinary hiding tent.

I had the houseboat towed laboriously up the Madmatti as far as it could be got, and then set off along the river bank to see what I could find in the couple of hours of daylight which still remained. Rounding a bend only a few hundred yards above the boat, I came in sight of a small patch of stones on the opposite side of the river, in the middle of which two stranded logs lay one across the other with a small heap of brushwood lodged against them. My eye at once caught the movement of a Jerdon's Little Ringed

THE COMMON SANDPIPER

(*Tringa hypoleuca*)

HODGSON'S PIED WAGTAIL

(*Motacilla alba hodgsoni*)

THE COMMON SANDPIPER

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Plover (*Charadrius dubius jerdoni*) between these logs and the water's edge, and watching it carefully through the glasses, I saw it settle down in a slight depression only a couple of yards from them. As luck would have it, this turbulent river was here broader than usual, so I was able to ford it, and, on reaching the spot, I found a nest containing but one quite fresh egg, only after a considerable search however, as the egg so blended with the shingle amongst which it lay, that unless one looked straight at it, it literally melted into its background.

With the assistance of the shikari whom I had taken out with me I pulled down the upper log and laid it parallel to the other one, thus making an excellent foundation for a 'hide' to use when the bird commenced sitting. As a matter of fact next morning the egg had disappeared. Why I wonder ?

A little further up I found a Hodgson's Pied Wagtail's (*Motacilla alba hodgsoni*) nest with large young ones in it. It was inside a wide cavity under the overhanging bank of the river, and would not have made a good photograph. Their nests are excessively common in May and I was certain to find other and more suitably placed ones, so I left them in peace and went on beyond the little village of Dachhgam to where there are large patches of stones and shingle on either side of the river, on which I knew from my experiences there the year before, that the Jerdon's Little Ringed Plovers breed in considerable numbers. Nor was I disappointed on this occasion, as I soon spotted many of them pottering about, some undoubtedly attending to young ones.

I then followed out my usual procedure; walked boldly into the middle of a large patch to disturb any birds which might be sitting, and then retreating about a hundred yards, I took up a convenient position screened from view by a tree trunk, and got out the glasses. Very soon I noticed a bird making its way back across the stones in short runs, halting between each little advance to spy out the land. At length it appeared to have reached its objective, and to have settled down. I now set off towards the spot, never taking my eye off it for an instant; yet, when I arrived there, nothing whatever could I see beyond endless stones. The bird had slipped away of course the moment I left the shelter of the tree, running in a series of short zigzags until it reached the river bank, and was now whistling plaintively from the opposite side of the river whence it had betaken itself on my nearer approach. I repeated the performance a second, and yet a third time, and was almost on the point of giving up the search, when I discovered that I was standing within six feet of a nest of four eggs. At times I must have been within an ace of treading on it. It is really almost unbelievable how one can fail to pick out these eggs from their surroundings. A more striking example of protective colouration it is impossible to cite. The birds, too, blend extraordinarily well with the stones, and even with binoculars it is most difficult to keep them in view, except when they are actually moving. This nest turned out to be in practically the identical spot, in which I took a nest the previous year on the very same date.

This time there were no convenient logs, so I impressed two

villagers into my service, and in a very short time we had raised a low circle of stones eight or nine feet from the nest, and about two and a half feet high. Just roomy enough inside to take myself cross-legged and my camera.

Returning next morning, I was gratified to make out the bird sitting quite peacefully on the nest. I was soon inside the 'hide' with the half-plate camera in position. Samad Shah's khaki umbrella made a perfect roof to the sangar, and when covered with a few leafy branches did not look a bit terrifying. I was really very comfortable and quite cool, the chinks between the stones providing quite good ventilation as well as the requisite peep-holes. The only difficulty was that the pole of the umbrella impeded my movements somewhat, as I had to sit with a leg on either side of it, and work with it just in front of my nose the whole time.

I was engrossed placing slides and other paraphernalia in more convenient positions, when, glancing through a chink I had purposely left open as my main spyhole, I was surprised to find that the bird was already seated calmly on its eggs. She must have returned the very moment my minions had left the stones. I had expected a considerable wait, as we had been working around the sangar for a good half hour, and it certainly must have looked a much more formidable structure than it did before our advent. She sat quite still and broadside on, only looking to right or left every few seconds, so I was very soon at work.

The click of the shutter had no effect on her at all, but in changing the plate holder, I inadvertantly knocked it against the umbrella pole. The sudden rap made her jump off the eggs in a bit of a hurry, but she only ran a couple of yards, then, seemingly thinking better of her cowardice, turned round and walked slowly back to the nest, close to which she stood for a moment, eyeing the 'hide' with a certain amount of distrust before settling down on the eggs again. She never seemed to notice the camera at all; partly I suppose, because it was well back in the shadow, the walls of the sangar being about 18 inches thick; and partly because I was only using the back components of the lens in order to get a larger image. As I was using a Zeiss convertible lens with a between-lens shutter, only the black shutter-leaves presented themselves to her. After two or three more exposures she entirely ignored the slight noises I was making in changing plates and resetting the shutter. In fact the more I made the stiller she became, which of course was all the better for me. I supposed, wrongly as it happened, that far from ignoring these sounds, as time went on, she was growing more and more suspicious and so listening the more intently; and I felt certain that it would take very little indeed to make her quit the nest. Some species, many of the Thrushes for instance, obviously behave in this manner. Yet on the other hand it is patent that with many other birds, suspicion only tends to make them move the more. Their heads go twisting round in every direction and they become so restless that it is almost impossible to get unmoved negatives of them.

I now bethought myself of trying to obtain a negative or two of

the bird standing over the nest, and with this purpose in view I lightly tapped the umbrella post to induce her to get up. To my surprise she never moved: a hiss produced no result: I mewed like a cat: I whistled: I spoke: I shouted: I went through my entire repetoire of popular ditties in the hopes that she might turn out to hate rag-time as much as I do: all to no purpose. She sat like a rock, evidently being quite used to subterranean noises, even of the strangest character. In despair I moved the camera, and pushed out a corner of the red focussing cloth. She went off like a streak: I feared for good and all, so, instead of replacing the half-plate, I leisurely rigged up in its place a quar.er plate reflex, which, I am sorry to say, I had also brought out with me. The entire batch of plates, which I had bought for this camera in Murree on my way up, turned out to be bad, and I exposed half a dozen on her in most excellent positions, before I closed down operations, not one of the resultant negatives of course turning out satisfactory.

Incidentally she had returned just as the reflex was ready, and had posed most beautifully for the first exposure, standing just behind the eggs looking down admiring them. I could have gone on exposing plates on her all day, making as much noise as I liked. Such behaviour on the part of so wily and shy a bird is almost unbelievable, but, as I have remarked elsewhere, birds vary in temperament as enormously as do human beings, and it is quite on the cards that the next Jerdon's Little Ringed Plover, on which I experiment, will be too shy to put in any appearance at all. I have since had further experiences of the same sort and it is now quite plain to me that to a great extent with birds 'only seeing is believing.' The evidence of hearing may arouse their suspicions but it is not enough, and as time goes on they pay less and less attention to the noises from the inside of the hide. It is not until they have the actual evidence of sight that suspicion turns to fear and that they can appreciate the presence of danger. I find that after being in the 'hide' for a time one can often talk and make as much noise as one likes, but if one accidentally or intentionally hits the sides of the tent so that movement becomes apparent the bird will leave the nest like a flash in an absolute panic. In the dark room, besides discovering that the quarter plates were all spoilt by damp, I was rather annoyed to find that the half-plate negatives were all pretty badly under-exposed. As the day had been an excellent one for photography, there being a thin film of cloud, just sufficient to soften the shadows somewhat, this was rather mystifying, until it dawned on me that I had completely overlooked the fact that I had been using only half the lens, and had stopped down the aperture, as if I had had the complete lens in use. Accordingly the next morning I returned once more to my scene of operations—only to find an empty nest. These eggs, too, had disappeared? I strongly suspect that the shikari was the culprit. He probably thought that I had finished with the nest. In Kashmir large numbers of Terns' eggs are taken by the villagers. In fact it is a marvel to me that the Terns manage to breed at all. Hence I see no reason why they should not also

have discovered that these Povers' eggs too, are a great delicacy. The gentleman in question of course denied all my accusations.

On the way back to the boat for tiffin I investigated an Eastern Jackdaw's (*Corvus monedula sœmmeringii*) nest in a hole in a high bank just opposite the village. I seem to remember taking eggs from this very hole the year before. This time it contained four young ones. I tried to get a photo of the parent birds entering it, using a distant release, but they objected strongly to the bright lens of the camera, and would not approach anywhere near it. In a tree close to the house boat was a Rufous-backed Shrike's (*Lanius schach erythronotus*) nest, containing five eggs.

The next day I left the boat, and moved up the river as far as Sonarwain. I was now keen on trying my luck with Common Sandpipers (*Tringa hypoleuca*), as on the islands, and to a lesser extent along the banks of this river, these birds breed most profusely. The islands, to which I have referred, are most numerous, and vary in size from little stoney patches a few yards long to well-covered stretches up to two or even three hundred yards in length. They are generally clothed with a sufficiency of low brushwood and soft undergrowth. Stranded logs and driftwood are dotted along their edges, the stones of which are continually moistened by the drifting spray from the boiling waters of the torrent. To reach many of the islands is an arduous and somewhat hair-raising task, as one would have a pretty rough time of it, should one loose one's balance and get swept off one's feet. We used to link arms, and work our way across in a string of three or four. We could then help one another over the difficult bits. The roar and swirl of the water used to half hypnotise me, and at times I really and truly felt it quite an effort to concentrate my mind on the task of standing up against the buffeting of the powerful current.

To show to what an extent the Sandpipers patronize these islands, I remember that in the previous year on one small island only about 40 or 50 yards long we found four nests, and during a morning spent in going from one island to another, we found so many that we didn't trouble to keep count of them. As far as I recollect the majority of these nests were above Sonarwain, and on this occasion I only found one with eggs below that place. There were plenty of birds about however, and I noticed a good many scratches. This nest could not have been in a better situation for my purpose, so after its discovery I did not take so much trouble in looking for others, which probably accounts, of course, for their seeming scarcity as compared with the previous year. As before we built a small sangar of stones, but this time only six feet away from the nest, and left it till the following day for the bird to get used to it.

Continuing up stream, I came across two nests of the Kashmir Roller (*Coracias garulla semenowi*), both containing fresh eggs ; one three ; the other four. These were both in cavities in the river bank, and in one the eggs could be plainly seen without enlarging the entrance, as it was merely a large chamber about a foot deep and

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JERDON'S LITTLE
RINGED-PLOVER
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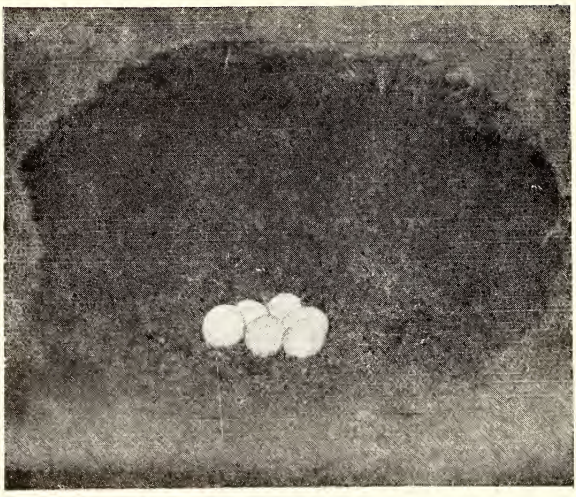
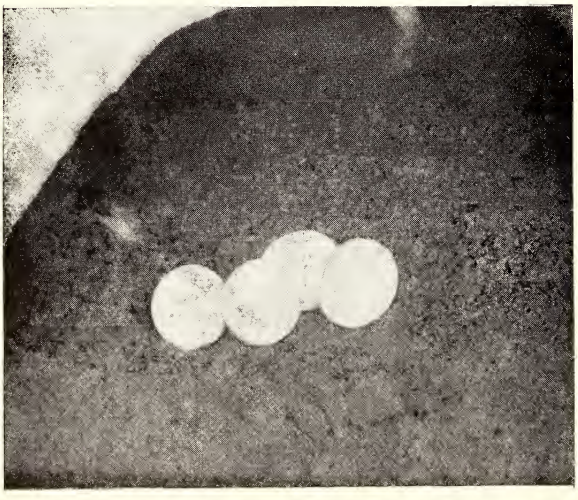
(*Charadrius dubius jerdoni*)



THE INDIAN PIED KINGFISHER
(*Ceryle rudis leucomelanura*)

HODGSON'S PIED WAGTAIL
(*Motacilla alba hodgsoni*)



THE KASHMIR ROLLER
(*Coracias garulla semenowi*)

nine inches wide with a slightly narrowed doorway. The eggs lay on the bare sand, amongst which I noticed many small particles of the hard parts of those large flying beetles. As I expected, Hodgson's Pied Wagtails proved very common, and I lit on no fewer than four nests before tiffin ; two with eggs and two with young. I completely failed as regards Indian Pied Kingfishers (*Ceryle rudis leucomelanura*). They were numerous along the lower reaches of the river, and at this very time in the previous year I found two nests with fresh eggs. As I badly wanted a half-plate photo of a nest of these birds, I was rather disappointed not to be able to repeat the performance this time, especially as I also wanted to see whether fish bones are always made use of, as the eggs in the one and only nest I have ever opened up were on quite a thick layer of small bones, which, by the way, are plainly visible in the photograph. A coolie brought me one of these birds, which he had actually caught in its tunnel, which however contained no eggs. When I took it from him it snapped at my hand, so to test its strength I let it nip one of my fingers. I very quickly regretted it too as the edges of its bill were decidedly sharp, and it hung on so firmly, that had I attempted to slide my finger out without first prizing its mandibles open, it would certainly have cut through the skin. As it was the flesh felt bruised for some time afterwards. Incidentally it made no attempt to transfix me with the sharp point of its dagger-like bill, which I should have thought would have been a much more suitable means of attack for such a bird. At the bridge at Sonarwain I met with the little Plumbeous. Water-robin (*Rhyacornis fuliginosa*). From here onwards they are quite common along with their near relative the White-capped Redstart (*Chaimarrornis leucocephala*). Below this point I have never seen either of these pretty little birds.

On this day I got one very interesting photograph of two young Jerdon's Little Ringed Plovers. I was walking over a large patch of stones, across the middle of which there flowed a tiny stream. Hearing a very agitated plover about fifty yards off on the opposite side of the beck, I looked round to see what the trouble was, just in time to see two baby plovers struggling through the water. They gained the other side, and started off to where the mother bird was still plaintively calling to them, but as soon as I approached, they hid behind a stone little larger than themselves. During the whole time I was operating upon them with the camera, they never moved a muscle, but, as soon as I turned my back to go my way, they scrambled off towards their perturbed parents.

After tiffin I built a rough ' hide ' close to a Grey Wagtail's (*Motacilla cinerea melanope*) nest in the roots of a bush on a small island just above the bridge, and from this I exposed the entire contents of another box of quarter plates. These incidentally were as bad as the others, so after this I gave up all idea of using the reflex at all. The bird was inordinately tame, and after I had made a couple of exposures, I demolished the greater part of the hide, and sat almost in full view of her. She continued to sit quite peacefully for a number of exposures, but when I completed the demolition process, she seemed to think that I had carried

things a bit too far, and leisurely walking off the eggs, refused absolutely to pose any longer.

The following morning I went down to try conclusions with the Sandpiper. The umbrella was fitted on top of my sangar as before, and well covered with leaves, branches and grass, and I prepared to await the arrival of my victim. I had only about quarter of an hour to wait, but soon realized that here was a very different personage from the Jerdon's Little Ringed Plover. Never still for an instant, she was possessed of the most acute hearing, and glanced to right, left or behind her at the slightest sound, continually bobbing her head, as if suffering from a severe attack of the hiccoughs. I began to despair of getting good negatives, as I wanted to give exposures of at least half a second. However, she seemed to quieten down a bit after ten minutes or so, so I determined to press the release immediately after one of her habitual hiccoughs, and trust to luck. She seemed to me to be off her nest almost before the shutter had opened, but as a matter of fact this turned out to be the best negative of all. Although she had left so abruptly, I could see her standing at the water's edge only about three yards off, evidently thinking things over, and almost before I had had time to change the plate, she was on the way back.

I now made a horrible discovery. A piece of black cloth, draped across the window of the sangar just below the level of the lens, had fallen outwards, and she was certain to see my hand the moment I attempted to reset the shutter. However I had to risk it, and it would be interesting to see what she would do. She was now at the nest again, but away she went the moment my fingers appeared by the lens. Nevertheless within ten minutes she was back at her post once more, but this time facing the spot whence the terrifying apparition had emerged. The noise of the shutter alarmed her, but she remained sitting, until my hand once more appeared on the scene. This time it was over twenty minutes before she dared to come back, and after a third exposure and its attendant reappearance of my hand, she gave way to her fear and refused absolutely to come anywhere near.

I have often wondered what her thoughts were, when the top of what I presume she took for a more or less inoffensive heap of brushwood and stones, probably harbouring a snake at most, suddenly heaved up, and gave forth that much feared and clumsy animal a human being ; for, when I lifted the umbrella and stepped out from my cramped quarters, she was standing on a stone in the water about fifteen yards away. Four days later, when I again passed the spot, I was very gratified to make her out still sitting on her eggs, beside a tumbled-down ' hide.'

I moved my tent next day further up stream, to where the hills close in on either side, and the river is narrowed down to a boiling torrent sweeping round and over high boulders, whose ledges and clefts provide perfect situations for nests of the Himalayan Whistling Thrush *(Myiophoneus horsfieldi temminckii)* and the Indian Brown Dipper *(Cinclus pallasii tenuirostris)*, Plumbeous Water-robins and White-capped Redstarts are here commoner than ever. Hodgson's